

## April 11, 2009 - Murtha: Meeting Military Needs

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Murtha: Meeting military needs

By Craig Smith

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Serving his 35th year in Congress from Pennsylvania, U.S. Rep. John Murtha chairs the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense. He will turn 77 in June.

Murtha served in Vietnam as a Marine and recently floated a novel plan to help replace the Air Force's aging fleet of 454 aerial refueling tankers. The proposal would fund the building of two tankers a month, instead of one, as initially planned. Boeing and the Northrop Grumman-EADS team would compete for the contract.

We spoke last week after he pitched the idea to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who on Monday announced deep cuts in the military's largest weapons programs, including halting production of F-22 fighter jets and a new helicopter for the president.

Murtha called the cuts "an important first step in balancing the department's wants and our nation's needs."

&bull;Q: You made sort of an interesting proposal to have a competition to speed up production of the aerial refueling tankers. How is that going?

&bull;A: I gave some details to the secretary this morning and I talked about some of the work we had done and the difficulties that he faces with any proposal he puts out there trying to have one company build the tankers. ... This tanker is 45 years old, it's the number-one priority in the Defense Department as far as getting something done. ... My proposal is to have competition between the two companies. The one that wins the competition would build more than the other company and we'd ... buy two a month rather than one a month. We could save money because we wouldn't have to spend as much money on the old tankers as we built more and more of the new ones. It costs almost twice as much to fly the old tankers as it does the new ones.

&bull;Q: What's the production time for one of these tankers?

&bull;A: Within three years, both of (the contractors) could have airplanes in the air. We'd give them money for research and development of aircraft. So we're talking about, you know, this is probably four years before we get any tankers in the air, at the minimum.

&bull;Q: So as Afghanistan heats up we're still going to be using the 45-year-old tankers as you said?

&bull;A: Well, this is absolutely right and this is one of the problems we face. They have no rail lines in Afghanistan, they have to resupply almost everything by air or by roads, and now they have lost access to some of the roads. So we're talking about a very expensive proposition getting resupplies in not only to our troops but to the Afghan troops we're trying to train.

&bull;Q: Do you see the effort in Afghanistan as being more expensive than Iraq?

&bull;A: I think if you say per person it would be more expensive, but if you add the number of people we had in Iraq, of course, it's going to be a more expensive proposition. But the trouble we have in Afghanistan is there's no resources there. The poppies are the only thing that is really, you could call it, a resource, but that's where the wrong side gets the money. And we've been trying to figure out a way to eliminate that and provide a cash crop for the Afghans. ... I've been saying to the administration be very cautious. The new policy is a big change in the way we've tried to solve things in the past. We can't solve them militarily. ... It took me 15 years to realize that in Vietnam putting more troops in didn't solve the problem.

&bull;Q: Have you any idea of a troops-on-the-ground number?

&bull;A: They wanted 35,000 at first. The president now says he's going to put 17,000 in and then 4,000 trainers. They're going to put those 17,000 down south where there's a lot of instability. One of the other problems we have though is Pakistan. If you look at the threat to the United States and to the world, instability in Pakistan worries me as much as anything else that's happening. With nuclear weapons, why, you know, we just have to be very, very careful about it and yet it's an independent country. We're not at war with them so we have to get permission when we operate in Pakistan, and so I'm very nervous about Pakistan. Iran comes next with the possibility of nuclear weapons, of course, and North Korea. ... If the Taliban were to take over, or whoever the enemy would be in that case, and destabilize the (Pakistan) government, it would be a real threat to world security.

&bull;Q: Your committee has looked at the president's new helicopter as being too expensive.

&bull;A: I said to these folks a year ago, "I know we all want to protect the president, but you guys have distorted this perfectly good helicopter to the point where you fly him away and everybody else is left in town." I mean this makes no sense at all.

&bull;Q: And it's become \$500 million for one helicopter?

&bull;A: It's \$500 million for one helicopter. So we last year

cut out the expensive helicopter and we said, "OK, relook at this thing." ... I had 14 people in, and (the) Secret Service, in particular, the White House people ... were making all these new requirements. The new requirements force the Navy ... to put a new engine, new blades, redo the helicopter. I said, "No, fellows, we're not going to do that." So I went to the White House and I told them, "Fellows, you don't want to cancel the whole helicopter, you just want to cancel the expensive one."

&bull;Q: One of the things you and I have talked about over the years has been your hospital visits. I know you make a lot of visits to the troops who are coming back. Are you hearing anything different than, say, six years ago from the men and women?

&bull;A: That's an interesting point. I just was out at Bethesda last week. There's a lot less casualties ... but there's a lot of people coming back with long-term injuries. For instance, I saw one young fellow, a captain, who was shot in the head and he had a titanium cover ... over his head but he got infected so he came back. Now he's blinded and they took it off and he was obviously distressed and had depression. What I'm seeing now is a lot more people coming back as I predicted they would from the long, from the very difficult injuries that they faced. ... The suicide rate is up, the divorce rate is up in the Army.

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